

and careless father, and, to his creditors and investors alike, the downtown version of Pancho Villa. To a post tape-recorder generation more accustomed to public and private faces which differ, the revised Edison is certainly more plausible, perhaps even more appealing. Yet it is as inventor-entrepreneur that Edison exists as an historical personage, and it is as inventor that Edison is least well portrayed in *A Streak of Luck*.

Conot's most impressive insights concern—to put it politely—Edison's somewhat unorthodox business and public relations practices. Edison was a deadbeat and a swindler, a man who would avoid payment of any debt to any creditor as long as he possibly could, a man who would happily sell the same inventions, or the same promises of the same inventions, under several different contracts to several different parties—then take whatever money was forthcoming and work on an entirely unrelated project. He could unabashedly explain to a group of New York investors whom he was charging half-price for a generator (which he was shipping to Europe under a separate agreement) that they were getting a bargain—half price for no generator—since he had discovered that the unit was unsuitable for their purposes anyway. Edison was perfectly capable of matching wits and chicanery, successfully, with the likes of Jay Gould, William Vanderbilt, and J. Pierpont Morgan. With a straight face, Edison could repeatedly announce to the newspapers, and thus to the world, that he had completely overcome all remaining obstacles to commercial development of this or that invention (electric light, phonograph, whatever) when in fact what he had running were little more than laboratory curiosities. To an astonishing degree, Thomas Edison created and cultivated his own myth—to his own benefit.

All this would be merely charmingly Runyonesque except that Edison applied his talents of financial and theatrical legerdemain to extraordinary purpose: the creation of the laboratories at Menlo Park and West Orange, the clear forebears, right down to the bootlegged research, of the great twentieth-century industrial research-and-development establishments. A generation before theft was reduced to an accepted corporate accounting practice, Edison hustled the robber barons themselves to fund research and development. It is this link between Edison the hustler and charlatan and Edison the immensely profligate inventive genius that is Conot's most important discovery.

*A Streak of Luck: The Life and Legend of Thomas Alva Edison.* By ROBERT CONOT. (Seaview Books, New York, 1979. Pp. xvii, 565. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$15.95 cloth; \$3.95 paper.)

*A Streak of Luck*, Robert Conot's biography of Thomas Edison, is an entertaining and informative but ultimately frustrating book. In three major areas, Conot makes new contributions to historical understanding of Thomas Edison. No more the genial genius, Conot's Edison is fakir and fraud, neglectful husband

Other Conot discoveries, of less moment perhaps, are equally intriguing: Edison the awesomely generous absentee husband, or Edison the forbidding father, the atheist Jehovah. The book abounds with small nuggets: the slightly obscene origin of the otherwise inexplicable name for the "long-waisted Mary Ann" generator; Edison having *Lucia di Lammermoor* recorded by artists singing in six different languages—at the same time; Edison and Ford laughingly shushing the earnest, ultra-conservative Charles Lindbergh; the incredible celebration of technology at Ford's Dearborn museum when the immortals last assembled—Edison, Ford, Firestone, Chrysler, Eastman, Orville Wright, Lee De Forest.

Still, for all his insight, Conot fails to come to terms with Edison the inventor. Conot's notions of invention are sprinkled almost randomly through the text, and range from the conventional (the Usher-Gilfillan concept of sequential contributions) to the bizarre (Edison turning to incandescent light to escape his "auditory travail" when working with sound systems). Although Conot occasionally notes the importance of economic factors, serendipity, or chemical dexterity in Edison's work, there is no consistent or lucid portrayal of Edison's inventive methods or inspiration. The extraordinary concern with total systems rather than component design, the keen eye for economic viability, the electro-mechanical and chemical themes which other scholars have found to pervade all of Edison's projects simply get lost in the chaotic detail of Conot's biography. Edison indeed may have lived the rumpled, slightly unsavory, and totally undisciplined life that Conot portrays, but his major systems bespeak an unexcelled coherence, elegance, and discipline. That paradox remains.

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